

# 9. Wombats

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## 1 TAXONOMY, DISTRIBUTION AND BIOLOGY

Wombats are diprotodont marsupials in the Family Vombatidae, and are most closely related to the koala. They occur only on mainland and off-shore islands of Australia, including Tasmania. There are three species in two Genera. The common wombat (*Vombatus ursinus*) lives in temperate forests and forest edges of south-eastern Australia, where habitat is suitable for burrowing. Its density is limited by food availability. There are three subspecies, which are found on the mainland, Flinders Island and Tasmania (Strahan 1995). The southern hairy-nosed wombat (*Lasiorhinus latifrons*) inhabits semi-arid grasslands and is limited to areas of South Australia, western Victoria and far eastern Western Australia. When habitat and climate are suitable, it can be found in significant numbers. The northern hairy-nosed wombat (*Lasiorhinus krefftii*) also lives in semi-arid grasslands and is now restricted to Epping Forest National Park in central Queensland. It is critically endangered with only about 100 animals remaining (IUCN Species Survival Commission 2001). The range of all three species has decreased significantly since European settlement (Strahan 1995).

Common wombats and southern hairy-nosed wombats are often kept in zoos and wildlife parks. Wild and orphaned wombats of these two species are often presented for veterinary care. No northern hairy-nosed wombats are kept in captivity (Horsup 1998).

The three wombat species are broadly similar in appearance. The common wombat has bare skin on

the nose and a coarse short coat. The ears are small and rounded. In contrast, hairy-nosed wombats have longer silky fur, soft furred muzzles and longer pointier ears. Northern hairy-nosed wombats are similar in appearance to the southern species, with a larger square muzzle (Strahan 1995). Adult wombats of all three species weigh about 20–35 kg. Males are larger than females except in the northern hairy-nosed species where females are larger in every dimension except neck girth (Johnson & Crossman 1991).

All three species of wombats were viewed as pests by European settlers and have been subject to persecution by land owners. Perceived problems include degradation of the environment through burrowing, damage to fencing and grazing competition with stock. In more recent times, burrows of southern hairy-nosed wombats have interfered with underground telecommunications cables.

Until the mid 20th century, common wombats were declared vermin with a bounty on their heads and in some cases there were attempts to eradicate populations. In most areas, wombats are now protected but land holders may obtain permits to cull if they are causing damage (Triggs 1996).

Other threats to wombats include land clearing, introduced and endemic diseases, motor vehicle trauma, inadvertent poisoning and predation by dogs and foxes. Changing pasture composition (from native perennial to annual and exotic plants) as a result of domestic stock or rabbit grazing may have a significant negative effect on wombat populations (Strahan 1995).